March 22, 2005

Mr. James Evans, Jr. Linebarger Goggan Blair & Sampson, LLP P. O. Box 17428 Austin, Texas 78760

OR2005-02456

Dear Mr. Evans:

You ask whether certain information is subject to required public disclosure under the Public Information Act (the "Act"), chapter 552 of the Government Code. Your request was assigned ID# 219885

The Caldwell County Appraisal District (the "district"), which you represent, received a request for information concerning all lawsuits filed involving the district during a specific time period. You claim that the requested information is excepted from disclosure under sections 552.101, 552.103, 552.107, and 552.117 of the Government Code. We have considered the exceptions you claim and reviewed the submitted information.¹

Initially, we note that one of the submitted documents is not responsive to the instant request for information, as it was created after the date that the district received the request. This ruling does not address the public availability of any information that is not responsive to the request, and the district need not release that information in response to this request. *See Econ. Opportunities Dev. Corp. v. Bustamante*, 562 S.W.2d 266 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1978, writ dism'd); Open Records Decision No. 452 at 3 (1986) (governmental body not required to disclose information that did not exist at time request was received).

¹We assume that the representative sample of records submitted to this office is truly representative of the requested records as a whole. See Open Records Decision Nos. 499 (1988), 497 (1988). This open records letter does not reach, and therefore does not authorize the withholding of, any other requested records to the extent that those records contain substantially different types of information than that submitted to this office.

Next, we must address the district's obligations under the Act. Pursuant to section 552.301(b) of the Government Code, a governmental body must ask for the attorney general's decision and state the exceptions that apply within ten business days after receiving the request. See Gov't Code § 552.301(a), (b). Although you requested a ruling within the ten business day period, you only claimed sections 552.102, 552.103, 552.107, 552.111, and 552.117 as the exceptions. The district did not raise section 552.101 until its letter dated January 4, 2005. Since you argue that some of the information is confidential by law, we will address your claims and arguments under section 552.101 of the Government Code. See Open Records Decision No. 150 (1977) (presumption of openness overcome by a showing that the information is made confidential by another source of law or affects third party interests); see also Gov't Code § 552.352 (distribution of confidential information constitutes a criminal offense).

We begin by noting, however, that most of the submitted information is made expressly public under section 552.022 of the Government Code. Section 552.022 provides, in relevant part:

- (a) Without limiting the amount or kind of information that is public information under this chapter, the following categories of information are public information and not excepted from required disclosure under this chapter unless they are expressly confidential under other law:
 - (16) information that is in a bill for attorney's fees and that is not privileged under the attorney-client privilege:

(17) information that is also contained in a public court record;

. . . .

(18) a settlement agreement to which a governmental body is a party.

Gov't Code § 552.022(a)(16), (17), (18). The submitted information contains attorney fee bills, court-filed documents, and two settlement agreements. Therefore, you may only withhold this information if it is confidential under other law. You argue that these records are excepted under sections 552.103, 552.107, and 552.111 of the Government Code. We note, however, that these sections are discretionary exceptions to public disclosure that protect the governmental body's interests and may be waived. See Dallas Area Rapid Transit v. Dallas Morning News, 4 S.W.3d 469, 475-76 (Tex. App.—Dallas 1999, no pet.) (governmental body may waive section 552.103); Open Records Decision Nos. 677 at 10 (attorney work product privilege may be waived) 676 at 10-11 (2002) (attorney-client privilege under section 552.107(1) may be waived), 665 at 2 n.5 (2000) (discretionary

exceptions generally). As such, sections 552.103, 552.107, and 552.111 do not qualify as other law that makes information confidential for the purposes of section 552.022. The district therefore may not withhold the section 552.022 records pursuant to these exceptions.

You contend, however, that some of the submitted court-filed documents involve a sexual harassment lawsuit. We note that section 552.101 of the Government Code constitutes other law for purposes of section 552.022; therefore, we will consider the applicability of section 552.101 to these court documents. Section 552.101 excepts from public disclosure "information considered to be confidential by law, either constitutional, statutory, or by judicial decision" and encompasses information that is protected by common-law privacy. Common-law privacy protects 1) highly intimate or embarrassing, such that its release would be highly objectionable to a reasonable person, and 2) not of legitimate concern to the public. *Indus. Found. v. Tex. Indus. Accident Bd.*, 540 S.W.2d 668 (Tex. 1976).

In Morales v. Ellen, 840 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. App.-El Paso 1992, writ denied), the court addressed the applicability of the common-law privacy doctrine to files of an investigation into allegations of sexual harassment. The investigation files in Ellen contained individual witness statements, an affidavit by the accused individual responding to the allegations, and the conclusions of the board of inquiry that conducted the investigation. Ellen, 840 S.W.2d at 525. The court ordered the release of the affidavit of the person under investigation and the conclusions of the board of inquiry, stating that the public's interest was sufficiently served by the disclosure of such documents. Id. In concluding, the Ellen court held that "the public did not possess a legitimate interest in the identities of the individual witnesses, nor the details of their personal statements beyond what is contained in the documents that have been ordered released." Id. After reviewing these records, we have marked the identity of the victim which must be withheld under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and Ellen.² We also note that references to the victim are contained in one of the submitted settlement agreements and the attorney fee bills. Thus, the district must also withhold the references to the victim in those documents under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and Ellen.

We also note that some of the submitted court-filed documents contain account numbers which are excepted under section 552.136 of the Government Code. Section 552.136 provides:

(a) In this section, "access device" means a card, plate, code, account number, personal identification number, electronic serial number, mobile identification number, or other telecommunications service, equipment, or

²Because of our ruling on this information, we need not address your section 552.117 claim.

instrument identifier or means of account access that alone or in conjunction with another access device may be used to:

- (1) obtain money, goods, services, or another thing of value; or
- (2) initiate a transfer of funds other than a transfer originated solely by paper instrument.
- (b) Notwithstanding any other provision of this chapter, a credit card, debit card, charge card, or access device number that is collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body is confidential.

Gov't Code § 552.136. We have marked the account numbers that must be withheld pursuant to section 552.136. The remaining court-filed documents must be released to the requestor.

You also contend that one of the submitted settlement agreements is confidential under section 154.053 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code. This section is also encompassed by section 552.101 of the Government Code. Section 154.053 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code lays out the standards and duties of impartial third parties and provides in part that:

(c) unless the parties agree otherwise, all matters including the conduct and The demeanor of the parties and their counsel during the settlement process, are confidential and may never be disclosed to anyone, including the appointing court[.]

Civ. Prac. & Rem. Code §154.053(c). This confidentiality section has been interpreted by the Texas courts as applying only to the impartial third parties, mediators, and restricted to those matters occurring during the settlement process. See In re Daley, 29 S.W.3d 915 (Tex. App.—Beaumont 2000), Hur v. City of Mesquite 893 S.W.2d 227 (Tex. App.—Amarillo 1995, writ denied). Accordingly, the district may not withhold the settlement agreement under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 154.053 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code. Thus, the district must release both settlement agreements to the requestor.

You also contend that the attorney fee bills are protected by the attorney-client and attorney work product privileges and, thus, they should be considered confidential under other law. The Texas Supreme Court has held that the Texas Rules of Evidence and Texas Rules of Civil Procedure are other law within the meaning of section 552.022. See In re City of Georgetown, 53 S.W.3d 328, 336 (Tex. 2001). The attorney-client privilege is found at Rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence, and the attorney work product privilege is found

at Rule 192.5 of the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure. Accordingly, we will consider your claims pursuant to Rule 503 and Rule 192.5.

Rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence provides:

A client has a privilege to refuse to disclose and to prevent any other person from disclosing confidential communications made for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services to the client:

- (A) between the client or a representative of the client and the client's lawyer or a representative of the lawyer;
- (B) between the lawyer and the lawyer's representative;
- (C) by the client or a representative of the client, or the client's lawyer or a representative of the lawyer, to a lawyer or a representative of a lawyer representing another party in a pending action and concerning a matter of common interest therein;
- (D between representatives of the client or between the client and a representative of the client; or
- (E) among lawyers and their representatives representing the same client.

TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). A communication is "confidential" if not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those to whom disclosure is made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client or those reasonably necessary for the transmission of the communication. *Id.* 503(a)(5). Thus, in order to withhold attorney-client privileged information from disclosure under Rule 503, a governmental body must: (1) show that the document is a communication transmitted between privileged parties or reveals a confidential communication; (2) identify the parties involved in the communication; and (3) show that the communication is confidential by explaining that it was not intended to be disclosed to third persons and that it was made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client. Upon a demonstration of all three factors, the information is privileged and confidential under Rule 503, provided the client has not waived the privilege or the document does not fall within the purview of the exceptions to the privilege enumerated in Rule 503(d). *Pittsburgh Corning Corp. v. Caldwell*, 861 S.W.2d 423, 427 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, no writ).

Portions of the attorney fee bills reveal or reflect confidential communications between the district, its representatives, and attorneys. Accordingly, we agree that this information is

protected by the attorney-client privilege and is therefore excepted from disclosure pursuant to Rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence. We have marked the information that may be withheld under Rule 503. The remaining information in the submitted fee bills, however, does not reveal confidential attorney-client communications, or pertains to communications involving parties whom you have not identified as being in a privileged relationship with the district or its representatives, attorneys, or consultants. We therefore find the remaining information in the submitted attorney fee bills is not protected by the attorney-client privilege and may not be withheld on that basis.

We next address your claim under Rule 192.5 with respect to the remaining attorney fee bills. For the purpose of section 552.022 of the Government Code, information is confidential under Rule 192.5 only to the extent that the information implicates the core work product aspect of the work product privilege. See Open Records Decision No. 677 at 9-10 (2002). Rule 192.5 defines core work product as the work product of an attorney or an attorney's representative, developed in anticipation of litigation or for trial, that contains the mental impressions, opinions, conclusions, or legal theories of the attorney or the attorney's representative. See Tex. R. Civ. P. 192.5(a), (b)(1). Accordingly, in order to withhold attorney core work product from disclosure under Rule 192.5, a governmental body must demonstrate that the material was (1) created for trial or in anticipation of litigation and (2) consists of the mental impressions, opinions, conclusions, or legal theories of an attorney or an attorney's representative. Id.

The first prong of the work product test, which requires a governmental body to show that the information at issue was created in anticipation of litigation, has two parts. A governmental body must demonstrate that (1) a reasonable person would have concluded from the totality of the circumstances surrounding the investigation that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue, and (2) the party resisting discovery believed in good faith that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue and conducted the investigation for the purpose of preparing for such litigation. See Nat'l Tank v. Brotherton, 851 S.W.2d 193, 207 (Tex. 1993). A "substantial chance" of litigation does not mean a statistical probability, but rather "that litigation is more than merely an abstract possibility or unwarranted fear." Id. at 204. The second part of the work product test requires the governmental body to show that the materials at issue contain the mental impressions, opinions, conclusions, or legal theories of an attorney's or an attorney's representative. See TEX. R. CIV. P. 192.5(b)(1). A document containing core work product information that meets both parts of the work product test is confidential under Rule 192.5, provided that the information does not fall within the scope of the exceptions to the privilege See Pittsburgh Corning Corp. v. Caldwell, 861 enumerated in Rule 192.5(c). S.W.2d 423, 427 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, no writ). We find, after reviewing the remaining attorney fee bill information, that none of it consists of core work product. Thus, the remaining attorney fee bill information must be released.

We now turn to your arguments for the remaining submitted information. Section 552.103 of the Government Code provides as follows:

(a) Information is excepted from [required public disclosure] if it is information relating to litigation of a civil or criminal nature to which the state or a political subdivision is or may be a party or to which an officer or employee of the state or a political subdivision, as a consequence of the person's office or employment, is or may be a party.

. . .

(c) Information relating to litigation involving a governmental body or an officer or employee of a governmental body is excepted from disclosure under Subsection (a) only if the litigation is pending or reasonably anticipated on the date that the requestor applies to the officer for public information for access to or duplication of the information.

Gov't Code § 552.103(a), (c). A governmental body has the burden of providing relevant facts and documents to show that the section 552.103(a) exception is applicable in a particular situation. The test for meeting this burden is a showing that (1) litigation was pending or reasonably anticipated on the date the governmental body received the request for information, and (2) the information at issue is related to that litigation. *Univ. of Tex. Law Sch. v. Tex. Legal Found.*, 958 S.W.2d 479, 481 (Tex. App.—Austin 1997, no pet.); *Heard v. Houston Post Co.*, 684 S.W.2d 210, 212 (Tex. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1984, writ ref'd n.r.e.); Open Records Decision No. 551 at 4 (1990). A governmental body must meet both prongs of this test for information to be excepted under section 552.103(a).

Based on your representations and our review, we find that the remaining submitted documents are related to six lawsuits which were pending on the date the district received the present request. However, it appears that most of these records have been seen by all parties to the lawsuits. Once information has been obtained by all parties to the relevant litigation through discovery or otherwise, no section 552.103(a) interest exists with respect to that information. Open Records Decision Nos. 349 (1982), 320 (1982). Thus, information that has either been obtained from or provided to the opposing party in the litigation is not excepted from disclosure under section 552.103(a). Accordingly, most of the remaining records may not be withheld. We have marked the records that are excepted under section 552.103 of the Government Code.³

You also claim that the remaining information is excepted under section 552.107 of the Government Code. Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code excepts from disclosure

³Further, the applicability of section 552.103(a) ends once the litigation has concluded. Attorney General Opinion MW-575 (1982); Open Records Decision No. 350 (1982).

information protected by the attorney-client privilege. When asserting the attorney-client privilege, a governmental body has the burden of providing the necessary facts to demonstrate the elements of the privilege in order to withhold the information at issue. Open Records Decision No. 676 at 6-7 (2002). First, a governmental body must demonstrate that the information constitutes or documents a communication. Id. at 7. Second, the communication must have been made "for the purpose of facilitating the rendition of professional legal services" to the client governmental body. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1). Third, the privilege applies only to communications between or among clients, client representatives, lawyers, and lawyer representatives. TEX. R. EVID. 503(b)(1)(A), (B), (C), (D), (E). Thus, a governmental body seeking to establish that a communication is protected by the attorney-client privilege must inform this office of the identity and capacity of each individual involved in the communication. Finally, the attorney-client privilege applies only to a communication that is confidential. Id. 503(b)(1). A confidential communication is a communication that was "not intended to be disclosed to third persons other than those to whom disclosure is made in furtherance of the rendition of professional legal services to the client or those reasonably necessary for the transmission of the communication." Id. 503(a)(5).

Whether a communication meets the definition of a confidential communication depends on the intent of the parties involved at the time the information was communicated. *Osborne v. Johnson*, 954 S.W.2d 180, 184 (Tex. App.—Waco 1997, no writ). Moreover, because the client may elect to waive the privilege at any time, a governmental body must explain that the confidentiality of a communication has been maintained. Section 552.107(1) of the Government Code generally excepts an entire communication that is demonstrated to be protected by the attorney-client privilege unless otherwise waived by the governmental body. *See Huie v. DeShazo*, 922 S.W.2d 920, 923 (Tex. 1996) (privilege extends to entire communication, including facts contained therein). Since, the remaining documents have been shared with opposing parties, they do not constitute confidential attorney-client

⁴ The privilege does not apply when an attorney or representative is acting in a capacity other than that of providing or facilitating professional legal services to the client governmental body. *In re Tex. Farmers Ins. Exch.*, 990 S.W.2d 337, 340 (Tex. App.—Texarkana 1999, orig. proceeding) (attorney-client privilege does not apply if attorney acting in a capacity other than that of attorney). Because government attorneys often act in capacities other than that of professional legal counsel, including as administrators, investigators, or managers, the mere fact that a communication involves an attorney for the government does not demonstrate this element.

⁵ Specifically, the privilege applies only to confidential communications between the client or a representative of the client and the client's lawyer or a representative of the lawyer; between the lawyer and the lawyer's representative; by the client or a representative of the client, or the client's lawyer or a representative of the lawyer, to a lawyer or representative of a lawyer representing another party in a pending action and concerning a matter of common interest therein; between representatives of the client or between the client and a representative of the client; or among lawyers and their representatives representing the same client. See Tex. R. Evid. 503(b)(1)(A), (B), (C), (D), (E); see also id. 503(a)(2), (a)(4) (defining "representative of the client," "representative of the lawyer").

communications. Accordingly, the district may not withhold any of the remaining submitted information from disclosure pursuant to section 552.107(1) of the Government Code.

You also claim that the remaining information is excepted from public disclosure under section 552.111 of the Governmental Code. Section 552.111 excepts from disclosure "an interagency or intraagency memorandum or letter that would not be available by law to a party in litigation with the agency." This section encompasses the attorney work product privilege found in Rule 192.5 of the Texas Rules of Civil Procedure. *City of Garland v. Dallas Morning News*, 22 S.W.3d 351, 360 (Tex. 2000); Open Records Decision No. 677 at 4-8 (2002). Rule 192.5 defines work product as:

- (1) material prepared or mental impressions developed in anticipation of litigation or for trial by or for a party or a party's representatives, including the party's attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees, or agents; or
- (2) a communication made in anticipation of litigation or for trial between a party and the party's representatives or among a party's representatives, including the party's attorneys, consultants, sureties, indemnitors, insurers, employees or agents.

Tex. R. Civ. P. 192.5(a). A governmental body seeking to withhold information under this exception bears the burden of demonstrating that the information was created or developed for trial or in anticipation of litigation by or for a party or a party's representative. Tex. R. Civ. P. 192.5; Open Records Decision No. 677 at 6-8 (2002). In order for this office to conclude that the information was made or developed in anticipation of litigation, we must be satisfied that 1) a reasonable person would have concluded from the totality of the circumstances surrounding the investigation that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue; and 2) the party resisting discovery believed in good faith that there was a substantial chance that litigation would ensue and [created or obtained the information] for the purpose of preparing for such litigation. Nat'l Tank Co. v. Brotherton, 851 S.W.2d 193, 207 (Tex. 1993). A "substantial chance" of litigation does not mean a statistical probability, but rather "that litigation is more than merely an abstract possibility or unwarranted fear." Id. at 204. Information that meets the work product test is confidential under Rule 192.5 provided the information does not fall within the purview of the exceptions to the privilege enumerated in rule 192.5(c). Pittsburgh Corning Corp. v. Caldwell, 861 S.W.2d 423, 427 (Tex. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1993, no writ). As previously discussed, the remaining submitted information has been shared with the opposing parties. Thus, we conclude that you have waived the privilege. Accordingly, none of it can be withheld under section 552.111 of the Government Code.

We note that one of the remaining documents is excepted from public disclosure under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with 154.073 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code. Section 154.073 states in pertinent part:

- (a) Except as provided by Subsections (c), (d), (e), and (f), ⁶ a communication relating to the subject matter of any civil or criminal dispute made by a participant in an alternative dispute resolution procedure, whether before or after the institution of formal judicial proceedings, is confidential, is not subject to disclosure, and may not be used as evidence against the participant in any judicial or administrative proceeding.
- (b) Any record made at an alternative dispute resolution procedure is confidential, and the participants or the third party facilitating the procedure may not be required to testify in any proceedings relating to or arising out of the matter in dispute or be subject to process requiring disclosure of confidential information or data relating to or arising out of the matter in dispute.

Civ. Prac. & Rem. Code § 154.073(a), (b). Further, in Open Records Decision No. 658 (1998), this office found that communications during the settlement process were intended to be confidential. Open Records Decision No. 658 at 4 (1998): see also Gov't Code § 2009.054(c). In this instance, one of the documents was a record made during the course of an alternative dispute resolution proceeding. Thus, the district must withhold this marked document under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with section 154.073 of the Civil Practice and Remedies Code.

We also note that the remaining information contains an e-mail address. Section 552.137 of the Government Code excepts from disclosure "an e-mail address of a member of the public that is provided for the purpose of communicating electronically with a governmental body" unless the member of the public consents to its release or the e-mail address is of a type specifically excluded by subsection (c). See Gov't Code § 552.137(a)-(c). The e-mail address contained in the submitted information does not appear to be of or "is not" the type specifically excluded by section 552.137(c). Therefore, unless the individual whose e-mail address is at issue consented to release of the e-mail address, the district must withhold the marked e-mail address in accordance with section 552.137.

In summary, we have marked the document that is not responsive to this request and need not be released. The district must withhold the marked references to the victim in the court-filed documents, settlement agreement, and attorney fee bills under section 552.101 of the Government Code in conjunction with common-law privacy and *Ellen*. The marked account

⁶ Subsections 154.073(c), (d), (e), and (f) are inapplicable in this instance.

numbers must be withheld under section 552.136 of the Government Code. The marked portions of the submitted attorney fee bills may be withheld under Rule 503 of the Texas Rules of Evidence. The district may withhold documents we have marked under section 552.103 of the Government Code. The district must withhold the marked document under section 552.101 in conjunction with section 154.073 of the Civil Practices and Remedies Code. Unless the individual whose e-mail address is at issue consented to release of the e-mail address, the district must withhold the marked e-mail address under section 552.137 of the Government Code. The remaining information must be released to the requestor.

This letter ruling is limited to the particular records at issue in this request and limited to the facts as presented to us; therefore, this ruling must not be relied upon as a previous determination regarding any other records or any other circumstances.

This ruling triggers important deadlines regarding the rights and responsibilities of the governmental body and of the requestor. For example, governmental bodies are prohibited from asking the attorney general to reconsider this ruling. Gov't Code § 552.301(f). If the governmental body wants to challenge this ruling, the governmental body must appeal by filing suit in Travis County within 30 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.324(b). In order to get the full benefit of such an appeal, the governmental body must file suit within 10 calendar days. *Id.* § 552.353(b)(3), (c). If the governmental body does not appeal this ruling and the governmental body does not comply with it, then both the requestor and the attorney general have the right to file suit against the governmental body to enforce this ruling. *Id.* § 552.321(a).

If this ruling requires the governmental body to release all or part of the requested information, the governmental body is responsible for taking the next step. Based on the statute, the attorney general expects that, upon receiving this ruling, the governmental body will either release the public records promptly pursuant to section 552.221(a) of the Government Code or file a lawsuit challenging this ruling pursuant to section 552.324 of the Government Code. If the governmental body fails to do one of these things, then the requestor should report that failure to the attorney general's Open Government Hotline, toll free, at (877) 673-6839. The requestor may also file a complaint with the district or county attorney. *Id.* § 552.3215(e).

If this ruling requires or permits the governmental body to withhold all or some of the requested information, the requestor can appeal that decision by suing the governmental body. *Id.* § 552.321(a); *Tex. Dep't of Pub. Safety v. Gilbreath*, 842 S.W.2d 408, 411 (Tex. App.—Austin 1992, no writ).

Please remember that under the Act the release of information triggers certain procedures for costs and charges to the requestor. If records are released in compliance with this ruling, be sure that all charges for the information are at or below the legal amounts. Questions or

complaints about over-charging must be directed to Hadassah Schloss at the Texas Building and Procurement Commission at (512) 475-2497.

If the governmental body, the requestor, or any other person has questions or comments about this ruling, they may contact our office. We note that a third party may challenge this ruling by filing suit seeking to withhold information from a requestor. Gov't Code § 552.325. Although there is no statutory deadline for contacting us, the attorney general prefers to receive any comments within 10 calendar days of the date of this ruling.

Sincerely

Jaclyn N. Thompson

Assistant Attorney General Open Records Division

JNT/jev

Ref: ID# 219885

Enc. Submitted documents

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